

Disciplining the Body: Excessive Exercise Disorder

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The concept of the ideal body is everywhere. More often women are the target of this idea. Images of the ideal body for a woman are shoved in our faces every day by advertisements in magazines, movies, and commercials. How to achieve this perfect body is forced upon us by personal trainers, dieticians, plastic surgeons, friends, and family. The latest diet trend and the newest piece of exercise equipment become relevant information to our everyday lives because healthy is equated with being skinny. Feminist theorists such as Michel Foucault (1990) and Judith Butler (1997), as well as the author of *Perfect Girls Starving Daughters* Courtney E. Martin (2007), have considered the pressures that are put on women to have this “perfect” body. The consequences are significant.

The expectations of body perfection often manifest in eating disorders. In general, nearly 24 million people of all ages and genders suffer from an eating disorder in the United States at some point in their lives (ANAD, 2012). The most common eating disorders are anorexia and bulimia; however there is another eating disorder that often goes unrecognized. It is known as compulsive exercise (also referred to as exercise addiction, exercise dependency, or obligatory exercise). This disorder is defined by a person’s frame of mind around exercising. People with this disorder exercise not because they want to, but because they feel compelled to do so and often struggle with guilt and anxiety if they miss a workout. For these people their days are planned around their workouts and illness. Injury, outings with friends, or bad weather will not deter them from completing the workout. Often times, the person is trying to establish a sense of control in order to cope with other underlying issues such as depression. Self-esteem is based on performance, but the person will never be able to achieve enough. People who compulsively

exercise also usually suffer from some disordered form of eating (KidsHealth: Compulsive exercise, 2012). The amount of food and what kind of food they eat is determined by how long or hard they worked out. If they ate “too much,” they will work out harder and longer to compensate for the food consumption. This continuous exercise regimen can lead to several debilitating physical side effects such as bone loss, muscle loss, dehydration, heart strain, joint deterioration, and in some cases, amenorrhea, which is the loss of a girl’s menstrual period. Mental side effects include social isolation, depression, anxiety, other compulsions, and a negative image of self (KidsHealth).

As mentioned earlier, ideal body perfection is frequently aimed at women, and as such, excessive exercise disorder is most often seen among women. Men, however, can also be affected. For men, this is often defined as Body Dysmorphia Disorder (BDD) (Olivardia, 2000). The main difference between men and women in regards to compulsive exercising is that men often exercise to increase muscle tone whereas women want to lose weight or tone their body to be slimmer (Pope, Phillips & Olivardia, 2002). Also, men who engage in compulsive exercise are usually involved in sports that have weight restrictions or emphasis on being a certain weight. These sports include swimming, wrestling, gymnastics, body building, and running (Sundgot-Borgen, 2011). The attitude of athletes involved in these sports is not just limited to men. In Martin’s *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters*, there is a chapter entitled “Past the Dedication is Disease: Athletic Obsession,” which discusses the mindset of a female athlete. Women are often compared to men in their athletic performance and are therefore pressured into extreme and unhealthy levels of commitment. Compared to men, women find it difficult not to think about their sport once done playing for the day. Women often feel they must prove themselves as dedicated athletes and continue to push themselves regardless of injuries or fatigue. This is

where dedication turns into disease, however the exercise compulsion and negative consequences often will go “unnoticed” until the season is over.

What is it about society that puts so much pressure on women to be thin that they are driven to exercise and eating disorders like this? Philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault (1990) offers one explanation stemming from the idea that when new political institutions such as the army, schools, hospitals, and prisons were introduced into society, the human body became a focus of discipline in order to be more efficient in employing the rules these societal institutions impose. Power and control over one’s body created disciplined, practiced bodies, which Foucault (1990) describes as “docile” bodies. Foucault’s (1990) theories fail to recognize the differences of power over men versus women. In an analysis of Foucault’s theory, Bartky (1990) looks at how dieting and exercise disciplines are different for men and women. Femininity in our society is seen as being slender, taking up less space, and being submissive. Men and women both exercise, but it is suspected that women are exercising for very different reasons where exercise becomes an act to adhere to socially constructed pressures of what is ideal and good for women’s bodies.

Butler (1997) describes how gender is a performance for our societal audience. Gender is a social construction that categorizes women as small, delicate, slender, and polite, while men are categorized as strong, loud, big, and powerful. Butler argues that women and men are therefore performing activities such as dieting and exercising in order to meet the expectations of socially constructed gender orders. Women obey these conditions without even realizing it because what they do realize is that they will be negatively judged if they do not fit this model. In order to comply with this “perfect” model, women will cause physical harm to their bodies through dieting and exercise to obtain the ideal beauty. My own story supports this conclusion.

Being: Excessive Exercise and the Reach for Perfection

When I was thirteen years old I received my first gym membership. I had suffered a personal trauma, but I was not ready to deal with it. Instead, I exercised. My workouts became more intense until they became the priority of my life. The first thing I thought about when I woke up was when I could exercise that day, and how long I would have to go so that I could eat what I wanted without feeling guilty. I refused to hang out with friends or family until my workouts had been completed. I began going to the gym two or three times a day, accumulating about three hours of exercise a day. Days of rest did not exist. My knees, ankles, shins, and hips were so worn down that it hurt to walk from my bed to the bathroom. On the outside I looked like a healthy, dedicated, and motivated athlete. On the inside I was exhausted, stressed, and depressed. Finally, my energy wore out and I got the help I needed. I now only exercise about four times a week and for a maximum of one hour. It is a hard issue to overcome, but once I did my life improved dramatically.

Below is a poem I began writing when I was around 16 or 17 years old and that I finished at the peak of my exercise disorder. It conveys the feelings and thoughts I had when obsessed with exercise.

Being

an athlete is my
excuse. Three hours of
working out is healthy?
But my body is

In

pain. Take a break?
I push harder. Burn
more calories. Commit to
the rules. Don't lose

Control

because it's everything. Can't
socialize with friends. Can't
sit still. Can't eat
"bad" food, until it

Feels
like my body will
collapse. No longer have
a choice. I want
to stop, but I'm

Powerless.

Women are often fighting to have power and control in their lives. Unfortunately, when women engage in unhealthy eating habits and exercise regimens, they are really giving the power back to the society that is telling them to be thinner. Gender is fluid and women do not have to be thin, quiet, or sweet in order to be women (Butler). The power and control that women have over their bodies is used in a different way than men, in that they are trying to make their bodies fit the feminine mold (Foucault). This is and will be a constant struggle for most women struggling to resist systems of power playing on the body; even so, addiction to exercise is possible to overcome. Like other eating disorders, counseling is strongly recommended as a first step to recovery. Working through underlying issues and gaining self-awareness is extremely beneficial for those suffering from eating disorders, including excessive exercise disorder (ANAD, 2012). It is extremely hard to tackle excessive exercise disorder alone so it is important to ask for help and have a good support system in place.

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